Unleashing the economic power of forest lands through producer organisations

Forest and farm producers, along with representatives from governments and non-governmental organisations from 42 countries have drawn up a ‘road map’ for supporting forest producer organisations as the socially just and environmentally sustainable way of addressing global deforestation.

The plan is an outcome of a conference, aptly named ‘Strength in numbers’, which took place in Guilin, China from 25-28 November. It gathered 150 participants from many forest-related sectors, countries and regions to discuss the role of producer organisations in sustainably managing forests and generating income at local, national and regional levels.

It was the first such meeting to focus on the important role of forest producer organisations. Governments and investors rarely recognise this role despite the fact that there are around one billion smallholders, indigenous people and local community members owning one quarter of the world’s forests and generating $75 – $100 billion per year in goods and services.

"As a group, local forest producers play a major role in global trade, and yet are often overlooked when we talk about the role of the private sector in forest landscape management and restoration," says Chris Buss, Deputy Director of IUCN’s Forest and Climate Change Programme. Many of the obstacles that producers face can be overcome by forming organisations and supporting each other at a practical and political level.

Despite the differences between participants, there were many clear areas of consensus or, as FAO’s Jeffrey Campbell, Manager of the Forest and Farm Facility, concluded “there are many roads but one map” and although “forest and farm producer organisations each have unique characteristics according to country, context, stage of development, product or enterprise, size, gender of members, cultural character and so on, they face a number of common challenges as well as solutions [to these challenges].”

A statement containing recommendations for donors, governments and producer organisations themselves, was developed and agreed by participants. This will serve as the ‘road map’ for strengthening producer organisations in future, with participants taking the recommendations back with them to their own countries.

A key recommendation was that all forest producers, regardless of the size and location of their forests, should have access to the services they need to develop successful forest-based enterprises. Forest producer organisations themselves can help deliver such services through partnerships with NGOs, consultants, private companies, government agencies and development agencies.

Conference participants also called on development partners to take a long-term approach to engaging with producer organisations and governments at the national, regional and global levels, including through the Forest and Farm Facility.

Finally, the statement underlines the need for governments to implement reforms to ensure that indigenous peoples, local communities and private smallholders have secure tenure of their forests,
land and trees. Governments also need to ensure that national and subnational legal and institutional frameworks encourage the development of producer organisations.

The conference was also an opportunity for China to showcase its extraordinary tenure reform that has left 115,000 forest producer cooperatives (representing 90 million forest farmers) with more income and more forest. Roughly 70 per cent of China’s annual reforestation of 2.9 million hectares is now attributed to such groups, although recent reports from China suggest that the future of subsidies supporting this reforestation process now hang in the balance.

“What was amazing about the conference” says Duncan Macqueen, a Principal Researcher on forests at the International Institute of Environment and Development “was the clear consensus that forest and farm producer organisations are the key to forest restoration and can visibly do so at scale, as China is demonstrating.”

The ‘Forest and Farm Facility’ (FFF), which seeks to promote sustainable forest and farm management by supporting producer organizations at all levels to engage in policies and investments that meet the needs of local people, was one of the co-organisers of the event.


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Note to editors:
The Forest and Farm Facility (FFF) promotes cross-sectoral coordination and enhances the organization and capacity of local people for forest and farm community’s advocacy, livelihoods, and sustainable landscape management. The FFF funds partnership agreements and small grants at local, national, regional and international levels, and seeks to build and share best practices, learning and experiences between these actors.

The FFF is hosted by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). It is overseen by a steering committee that ensures representatives of local forest family, community and indigenous rights-holder groups take control. Its management team includes staff from FAO, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

In 2013, the FFF began working in six countries identified by the steering committee as a priority. These were the Gambia, Guatemala, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal and Nicaragua.
